

Nature Notes, June 2022

Birding during COVID times

more solo than social

By Guy Wapple

When the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus/COVID-19 a pandemic, our world changed and our lives were affected in many ways. Like everyone else, birders and nature lovers had to adjust their behaviour.

Programs of the Saskatoon Nature Society (SNS), including group field trips to explore nature in and around the city, had to adapt to gathering limits. The numbers accommodated on field trips were reduced and car-pooling was restricted. As a result, since 2020, my birding has been more solo than social.

I became interested in birds while growing up in my hometown of Biggar back in the 70's. My only regular companion was my late brother Rodney. Years later, my youngest brother, Rob, also took up the hobby so the two of us did plenty of birding together.

In 1985, I moved to Saskatoon and soon joined the SNS, which provided opportunities for social birding in groups. However, with my unpredictable 'on-call' life with CN Rail during my working career, I've spent many hours birding on my own during the past nearly five decades. So personally, the pandemic really hasn't meant a huge adjustment for me. Having said all that, I do look forward to the day when we are all comfortable attending meetings and interacting on field trips, just like "the good old days"!

Much of my recent birding has focused on local parks. Saskatoon is a fairly 'green' city, so there are dozens of parks to explore and a broad diversity of birds to discover. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that nearly 300 different bird species have been identified within city limits!

The South Saskatchewan River is a natural wildlife corridor that splits the city in two. While there are several fine parks located along the riverbank – Diefenbaker, Gabriel Dumont, Cosmopolitan, Meewasin and Factoria, to name a few – I always enjoy exploring the area around the Weir. This area has turned up an impressive 184 bird species, making it one of the more productive birding spots in Toon-Town.

I have spent countless hours walking the trail through the riparian woods, flushing migrant thrushes, sparrows and warblers, not to mention enjoying the antics of the pelicans as they feed below the dam.

Another place I enjoy visiting is President Murray Park on Colony Street. While perhaps not quite as diverse in terms of bird life, there still have been 125 species recorded here, including 'northern' species such as American three-toed and black-backed woodpecker, boreal chickadee, northern goshawk and yellow-bellied



Photo: John Patterson

The Riverbank is prime bird habitat and a walk along the trails offers excellent viewing opportunities.

flycatcher. If you arrive early in the morning, when vehicle and pedestrian traffic is light, among the spruce trees that originally numbered 1100, you can almost imagine yourself in the middle of the Boreal Forest.

Closer to home here in the northeast 'burbs', John Avant Park is developing into a fine birding area. It features a man-made creek which empties into a pond and can be very productive indeed! The bird list now stands at 109 species, with several new varieties being added each year.

Also nearby is my personal favourite, the Forestry Farm Park and Zoo. With close to 250 native and introduced plant varieties, plus a trout pond located near the south end, 185 bird species have been recorded here. Notable rarities have included field sparrow, Connecticut warbler and summer tanager.

One of my most memorable birding days ever was August 30, 1992, when several hundred songbirds totalling 72 species were 'grounded' by cool, rainy weather. Such 'fallouts', as we call them, are a birder's dream. Go for a walk in the park and create your own memories.

Guy Wapple is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society. The best nature destinations in the area are described in the SNS publication *A Guide to Nature Viewing Sites in and Around Saskatoon* (3rd Edition).

The opinions expressed above are those of the writer, a long-term member of the Saskatoon Nature Society.

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